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ABSTRACT

A study examined the evaluation methods used in 58 top public relation projects, specifically the Silver Anvil winners of 1984 and 1985, to discover how well public relations practitioners are measuring and reporting success. Results indicated that measures of communication effect were most likely to be employed by Silver Anvil winners, measures of communication output were next most likely, and measures of organizational goal achievement were least likely. However, the typical Silver Anvil winner employed several methods of evaluation. When the criteria for confirming cause and effect are applied to the 40 cases in which inferred organizational goal achievement was cited, only 13 of the 58 Silver Anvil winners can claim that their public relations efforts may have had an effect on organizational goal achievement. Though public relations practitioners are aware of evaluative research, they cannot yet convincingly demonstrate how much credit they deserve for their evaluative results. (SRT)

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HOW PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS MEASURE SUCCESS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SILVER ANVIL WINNERS

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--Abstract--

HOW PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS MEASURE SUCCESS:

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SILVER ANVIL WINNERS

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The need to document results and prove that public relations is working has raised interest in recent years in the evaluation stage of the public relations process. Since 1982, for example, evaluation data must be included in all entries in the Silver Anvil competition, the "Academy Awards" of public relations.

On the assumption that Silver Anvil winners represent some of the nation's best public relations work, this paper reports a critical analysis of the evaluation methods used by the 58 Silver Anvil winners for 1984 and 1985. A empirical typology of 12 evaluation methods is developed, and the usage of various methods measured. The methods and their use are critiqued according to criteria for causality established by Lazersfeld.

A great deal of evaluation activity may be found among the Silver Anvil winners. Winners typically employ packages of three or four different evaluation methods, including a mix of measures of communication output, communication effect, and organizational goal achievement. But the specificity of data varies widely, including substantial amounts of purely anecdotal or impressionistic information. Many of the measurements employed are concerned with public relations output instead of bottom-line outcomes. Moreover, only 43 of the 58 cases either show or claim organizational goal achievement, and of these, only 13 can be said to even partially meet Lazersfeld's criteria.

It is concluded that the level of quality of evaluation activity in public relations practice is far lower than the level of quantity. Considerable improvement is needed if public relations is to claim that it can both get results and prove it.

"Evaluation" or evaluative research has long been described as the fourth stage in the classic four-step public relations process, preceded by research, planning, and action (see Cutlip, Center and Broom, 1985, for example). Evaluation's last-place position has unintentionally symbolized the importance many practitioners assigned it. Public relations practitioners have traditionally preferred more intuitive and impressionistic approaches, arguing--as one put it--that "measuring public relations is like trying to measure a bucketful of eels" (Lindenmann, 1980).

In recent years, however, interest in evaluation has been increasing as other professional areas, such as education, health care and social welfare, have made substantial commitments to evaluation (Kosecoff and Fink, 1982). Public relations practitioners are also being pressured from within to show results on the bottom line. A number of authors have taken this position, ranging from Lindenmann in 1980 ("From here on in, the message from management to public relations and public affairs

professionals is basically this: 'Give us the facts...hard, proveable facts to justify whatever you're doing...") to Grunig and Hunt in 1984: "The days of nonexistent and sloppy evaluation in public relations have ended."

Illustrating the trend has been the requirement since 1982 that all entries in the Public Relations Society of America's Silver Anvil awards competition include detailed information on how they evaluated success. Nevertheless, the question remains: just how well are public relations practitioners measuring and reporting their bottom-line accomplishments?

This paper is a critical examination of the evaluation methods used in what were judged to be some of the top public relations projects in the United States: the Silver Anvil winners for 1984 and 1985. Its objective is to find out how well public relations practitioners are measuring and reporting success. As such, it is part of the larger effort by various task organizations to more usefully assess the outcomes of their actions; it is concerned with what might be called the epistemology of results: what have we really accomplished here and how do we know we have accomplished it?

METHODOLOGY

The Silver Anvil award winners for 1984 and 1985 were chosen for this study because of their recency. In these two years Silver Anvils were conferred on a total of 58 case studies submitted by businesses, government agencies, trade associations and nonprofit organizations in categories ranging from community relations to marketing communication.

Data were obtained from the case summaries of winners which PRSA publishes each year. An empirical typology of evaluation methods was developed by examining the cases. Then the frequencies with which the various methods were used in the 58 cases were computed. Criteria for effective evaluation were also reviewed. The implications of the methodological choices were then assessed in light of the criteria for effective evaluation.

AN EMPIRICAL TYPOLOGY OF EVALUATION METHODS

A total of 12 different methods of demonstrating results were found to have been utilized by the Silver Anvil winners. In turn, these methods can be divided into three broad categories:

* Measures of communication output;
* Measures of communication effect;
* Measures of organizational goal achievement.

Five different methods of measuring communication output, five methods of evaluating communication effect, and two methods of reporting organizational goal achievement were identified. Following are more detailed descriptions of each category and the methods in it.

MEASURES OF COMMUNICATION OUTPUT

"Output" means messages and related matters, such as their distribution, placement, and target audiences. In terms of the Lasswell model of communication, "output" refers to the "what is said," "through which channels," and "to whom" (Lasswell, 1971).

Note, however, that output data by themselves do not say anything about the success or effect a public relations project may have had in reaching people, in influencing them, or in achieving the main goals of the sponsoring organization. Output data only indicate some of the communication effort that went into striving for success.

Nonetheless, many Silver Anvil winners included output measures with their results data. Five different measures of communication output were employed:

(1) Messages Produced by Entrant:

Silver Anvil case studies often cite the quantity of press releases, flyers, booklets, public service announcements, posters, speeches, meetings, conferences, events, etc., produced and distributed by the entrant. Such measures do not indicate the extent any of these messages were actually published or broadcast by the mass media, nor audience sizes for them, but simply the volume of messages sent out.

(2) Contacts Made by Media:

Some Silver Anvil entrants note the number of inquiries of received from the mass media, interviews given, press credentials issued, or media representatives attracted to public relations events. While these are effect of sorts, they are effects only on intermediaries--the media--and do not directly evidence effects on ultimate audiences.

(3) Media Coverage:

This is the quantity (in terms of space or time) and/or quality of coverage actually accorded by mass media channels. These successes are sometimes reported with great statistical specificity--in column inches, air time, number of "branded mentions," advertising dollar-value equivalents, etc.,--or they may be expressed in sweeping generalizations, such as "extensive" or "nationwide." Sometimes Silver Anvil entrants describe their success anecdotally by citing "prestige placements"--e.g., The New York Times, AP national wire, Today Show, etc. And sometimes coverage is described in qualitative terms, i.e., how favorable or unfavorable it is thought to have been. In this regard, it should be noted that the absence of negative media publicity can also be regarded as favorable coverage.

(4) Inferred Target Audiences:

These are not measures of of the actual number of receivers of a public relations message itself, but rather are reports of the size of the

audience for the larger medium in which the message appeared, such as the circulation of periodicals or the size of broadcast audiences. Thus, the number of receivers of the message can only be inferred. Included here "impressions," which take into account passalong readership and repeat viewings by the same audience. In some cases the audience is not described in statistical terms at all, but simply claimed to be "extensive" or "large." In all cases, however, the size of the audience is inferred from the medium; the actual number of consumers of the message itself is not shown.

(5) Dollar Measures

Sometimes the cost--"lower than expected" or "under budget"--is cited as an indicator of success.

MEASURES OF COMMUNICATION EFFECT

By this is meant actual effect on ultimate audiences (not intermediaries, like gatekeepers), as demonstrated by some kind of behavior. Sometimes entrants describe effects in statistical terms, other times in qualitative terms or in generalizations. Note that having an effect on an audience is not equivalent in this typology to achieving the organization's goals; the goals achieved in affecting a target audience are only instrumental ones: i.e., means to ends.

(1) Actual Audiences:

Unlike the inferred audience, an actual audience is one found to have paid attention to the public relations message itself. The behavior of attending to the message is de facto a demonstrated effect. This fact may be indicated through reports of attendance at public relations events, whether estimated or carefully measured by counting noses. The audience for MEDIA messages usually is determined by some kind of formal study or survey; some proportion of those sampled are found to have "noted" or "remembered" or otherwise received the message; having done so is a measurable behavior.

(2) Audience Feedback:

This refers to voluntary reactions from the audience, such as letters and calls. "Inquiries" are recorded here, as are calls to "fact lines" or "information services." Also included here are any feedback systems in which audience response had been solicited or invited, but in which participation is still voluntary. Not included here are more formal research studies in which respondents are sought out in some manner and sampled in a systematic way.

(3) Praise and Recognition

Entrants sometimes cite prizes acceptances, awards, invitations, and other formal recognitions garnered through their efforts. They also may quote praise from clients, superiors, media parties (either through "editorials" or directly), experts or authorities. Included here also are reports of the public relations program or parts of it being copied or replicated by other agencies ("imitation is the sincerest form of flattery").

(4) Cognitive Change

These are reports on such cognitive variables as perceptions of image and awareness, attitude change, opinion, morale, understanding, credibility, approval, learning, retention, et al, found in indicated target audiences. The reports may range from claims of achievement in these areas to carefully constructed scientific research studies, such sample surveys or depth interviews.

(5) Continuation or Expansion of Public Relations Program

Sometimes Silver Anvil entrants will point to a decision to continue, expand or extend the public relations program as a demonstration of its success.

MEASURES OF ORGANIZATIONAL GOAL ACHIEVEMENT

It is agreed among sociologists who study organizations that an organization is best defined as a system set up to achieve goals (Blau and Scott, 1962). These transcendent outcomes that organizations seek to achieve are best referred to as terminal goals, to distinguish them from the more intermediary instrumental goals, which are only means towards ends.

(1) Inferred Goal Achievement

Public relations practitioners often point to some goal of the organization and assert that their project was responsible for, or at least contributed to, its achievement. However, this is only inferred from the coincidence of public relations effort and organizational goal achievement; no hard evidence of causality is presented.

(2) Substantiated Goal Achievement

Some organizational goal (larger than attitude change or perceptual effect) achieved by the client organization is demonstrably shown by specific evidence--and not just assumed--to have been achieved wholly or in part by the entrant's public relations work.

CRITERIA FOR EFFECTIVE EVALUATION

While many aspects of a public relations program are appropriate for evaluation, in the last analysis the question that counts most is this: how did this program contribute to the achievement of the organization's goals?

The question is simply another way of stating one of the most fundamental and enduring issues in science, namely, that of causation (or causality or cause-and-effect). While the complexities of human and social behavior make causal explanations hard to come by, the acceptance of public relations as a management function requires that we continually strive for "hard, proveable facts to justify whatever you're doing," even if we can't always achieve them.

Lazersfeld (1959) has suggested three criteria for causality:

(1) The cause must precede the effect in time;

(2) The variables of cause and effect must be empirically correlated with each other;

(3) The empirical correlation observed between the cause and the effect cannot be explained away by the influence of any other variables.

Adapted to the specific needs of public relations, these criteria were be used to assess the evaluation data Silver Anvil winners offered on their own behalf.

RESULTS

(1) Measurement Categories Preferred

Among the three broad categories of evaluation method, it was found

that measures of communication effect were most likely to be employed by Silver Anvil winners; 53 of the 58 case studies, or 91%, used at least one measurement method from that category. Next most likely to be employed were measures of communication output: 47 case studies, or 81% of all winners, included at least one such measure. Least likely to be included were measures of organizational goal achievement: only 42 case studies, or 72%, included at least one.

However, very few case studies relied on a single broad category of measure to evidence their success: only two case studies relied solely on measures of communication output, only one relied solely on measures of communication effect, and none relied solely on measured of organizational goal achievement.

Indeed, half of the 58 case studies presented "evaluation packages" that included measures selected from all three categories. Of the remainder, 13, or 22.4%, used methods selected from both the categories of communication output and communication effect; 9, or 15.5%, used both measures of communication output and organizational goal achievement; 4, or 6.9%, used both measures of communication effect and organizational goal achievement.

(2) Evaluation Methods Preferred

As explained earlier, the three broad categories include a total of 12 different evaluation methods. Among the 1984 and 1985 Silver Anvil winners, no cases were found in which fewer than two out of a possible 12 methods of evaluation were employed; on the other hand, 14 cases, or 24%, used no more than two. The mean number of evaluation methods used was

3.66, reflecting the following distribution:

2 methods used	14	24.0%
3 methods used	15	25.9%
4 methods used	12	20.7%
5 methods used	12	20.7%
6 methods used	4	6.9%
7 methods used	1	1.7%

In terms of preferred method, inferred goal achievement was the evaluation method used in the largest number of case studies--69%--but substantiated goal achievement was the method employed least, being found in only three cases (5.2% of the total).

Between these two extremes were the other 10 evaluation methods, with measures of communication effects dominating the top of the list:

Inferred goal achievement	40	69.0%
Media coverage	35	60.0%
Cognitive measures	31	53.5%
Praise	22	37.9%
Actual audiences	18	31.0%
Audience feedback	12	20.7%
PR to continue	12	20.7%
Contacts from media	11	19.0%
Messages produced	9	15.5%
Dollar measures	5	8.6%
Substantiated goal achievment	3	5.2%

(3) Organizational Goal Achievement

It has already been shown that inferred goal achievement was the single evaluation method most preferred in Silver Anvil case studies. "Inferred goal achievement" is used here to mean organizational-level goals which have been achieved and for which at least some credit for public relations is claimed, but not DIRECTLY demonstrated.

Some examples include:

* Following the highly publicized first official port visit to the city of Houston by the nuclear submarine USS Houston, "the Navy recruiting district...reported a significant increase in 'walkins' and inquiries on oportunities in the Navy." However, no evidence is shown that recruitment actually increased or that the USS Houston project had any effect on its so doing.

* National Photo Week was was created on behalf of the Photo Marketing Association and conducted for the first time May 7-13, 1984. U.S. government figures showed sales of cameras and supplies rose an average of 29% a month from May through August, 1984. Other than the coincidence of events, however, no data is presented to demonstrate that National Photo Week in itself had any effect on sales or whether other variables, such as advertising or economics, may have played a role.

When a public relations project has not included the kind of tracking research which would permit direct attribution of recruitment, sales, or other important outcome to the public relations effort, then practitioners should support their claims by appropriate evidence from other evaluative measures. Ordinarily, this will best come from cognitive change, which usually involve some kind of attitude research. If we can agree that an attitude is a predisposition to act, we can assume that practitioners will have significantly strengthened their claim to have had an effect on organizational goal achievement when they show both systematically measured "predispositions to act" by audiences targetted for communication efforts AND the actions by those audiences which the organization made it their goal to achieve.

Thus, in the spirit of Lazerfeld's criteria for causality, the following expectations should be met:

a. TEMPORAL: Not only should the causation precede the effect, but the report of cognitive change should include appropriate "before-and-after" or benchmark data, supported by statistical tests of significance, so it can learned whether any cognitive changes did in fact take place.

b. CORRELATIVE: There should be specific evidence that organizational goal achievement did in fact occur. This evidence should be concrete and, where appropriate, quantified. Examples would include sales increases in dollar amounts, comparative data enlistment of new members or recruits, or passage or repeal of a law as desired by the sponsoring organization. Both the measure of cognitive change and the goal achievement should have a clear and logical relationship to each other, so it may be fairly said that both are dependent variables sharing the same independent variable, the public relations campaign. In those cases where statistical correlation is possible and appropriate, generally accepted guides to the importance of correlation coefficients should be used. For example, Guilford (1956) provides an interpretation of Pearson r scores ranging from "negligible relationship" (a Pearson r of less than .20) to "very dependable relationship" (more than .90).

c. PARSIMONIOUSNESS: All other possible explanations for the organization's goal achievement should be satisfactorily disposed of and, if apropriate, statistically controlled for. Were there no significant

changes in the economy which might account for increased sales? Were there no social conditions that might account for a rise in Navy recruiting? Were there no price changes, product introductions, advertising campaigns, or whatever that might have influenced outcomes?

In light of these critical expectations, the 40 Silver Anvil cases which employed "inferred goal achievement" as an evaluative method were reviewed, with the following results:

a. Of the 40 cases, only 22 were accompanied by reports of cognitive change.

b. Of these 22 cases, only 18 included reports of cognitive change which were based on systematically gathered data, such as opinion surveys. (The rest relied on impressionistic or anecdotal reports of "improved morale," "more favorable attitudes," etc.)

c. Of the 18 remaining cases, only 12 included benchmark data against which post-test cognitive data could be measured for change.

d. Of the 12 remaining cases, only 10 substantiated their claims of goal achievement with concrete data; the others were so sweeping as to be unproveable.

e. None of these or any of the other cases made reference of any kind to the possibility other causative factors might have been operating. (In some cases it might be deduced that it was very likely no others factors were operating, but in many others it seemed just as likely there

might be.)

DISCUSSION

This analysis of 58 award-winning public relations projects suggests that evaluation is getting considerable attention from practitioners--at least those entering and winning Silver Anvil awards. Not only do their projects typically use three or four different methods of evaluation, but they also draw them from more than one of the three broad categories of evaluation measures: those of communication output, communication effect, and organizational goal achievement.

Thus, the typical Silver Anvil winner is found to employ a "package" of evaluation methods, and these methods include more than the time-honored "news releases by the bale, clippings by the pound" reports. They also may include measures of audiences, both inferred and real; contacts received from media, feedback from target audiences, dollar measures, praise and recognition, extensions of the public relations project, and measures of cognitive change. Especially interesting are the 43 cases--74.2% of all--which explicitly claim or demonstrate organizational goal achievement, evidence perhaps of a growing bottom-line orientation of practitioners.

In a number of cases, moreover, the data are detailed, specific and the product of careful research, ranging from probability surveys to formal content analysis studies. In some instances the technology of measurement is sophisticated enough to include concepts as "benchmark studies," "branded mentions" and "gross media impressions."

In spite of this, the specificity of the data supplied in almost all measurement categories was found to range from the statistically precise to the broadest and vaguest of sweeping generalizations. Even some award-winning public relations practitioners use impressionistic and anecdotal evidence to support their claims. And in any case the bottom-line impact of a public relations procedure can only be guessed at from all measures of communication output and many measures of communication effect, no matter how specific the data.

When the criteria for confirming cause and effect, adapted from Lazersfeld, are applied to the 40 cases in which inferred organizational goal achievement was cited, only 10 could be found which were corroborated by systematic studies of cognitive change that were sufficiently complete to include benchmark data. These 10, added to the 3 cases which included demonstrated goal achievement, mean that only 13 cases out of 58 Silver Anvil award winners--or 22%--can even claim their public relations efforts may have had an effect on organizational goal achievement. Moreover, none of these cases took the trouble to rule out other possible causes of the goal achievement.

The good news about public relations evaluation is that many practitioners (or at least those who enter national competitions) are paying attention to evaluative research and demonstrating an orientation to bottom-line results. The bad news is that most of them cannot yet convincingly show how much credit they deserve for getting those results. Grunig and Hunt might better have put it this way: The days on nonexistent evaluation in public relations may be over, but those of sloppy evaluation

are not.

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